DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 266 485 CS 209 585

AUTHOR Reed, Arthea
TITLE M. E. Kerr and Marijane Meaker Help Students Learn How to Write Fiction.
PUB DATE Nov 85
NOTE 8p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (75th, Philadelphia, PA, November 22-27, 1985).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cognitive Processes; College Students; *Creative Writing; English Instruction; *Fiction; Higher Education; *Revision (Written Composition); Student Writing Models; Writing Improvement; *Writing Instruction; Writing Skills
IDENTIFIERS *Kerr (ME)

ABSTRACT

After students recommended books by M. E. Kerr, such as "Is That You, Miss Blue?" and "Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack," a college teacher realized that Kerr's books contained memorable characters and were suitable for classroom use. Particularly useful was Kerr's 1983 nonfiction book, "Me, Me, Me, Me, Me," which recounts episodes from Kerr's own life and explains how people in real life became characters in her books. The teacher used the book as a model to teach writing to university students. Students wrote memoirs and discussed them with peer writers and with the class as a whole, until their nonfiction personal memories evolved into pieces of fiction. (An example of student writing is included.) (DF)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Arthea J. S. Reed

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED266485

M. E. KERR AND MARIJANE MEAKER HELP STUDENTS LEARN HOW TO WRITE FICTION

by Arthea (Charlie) Reed, PhD
Associate Professor, Education
University of North Carolina-Asheville
Editor, The ALAN Review

I first discovered M. E. Kerr more than a decade ago when one of my students recommended a new book to me. The book was Is that you, Miss Blue? I found myself caught up in the story, not because of the plot, but because of the true-to-life dipiction of the characters. I cried and laughed as I read that book. If a book makes me cry and laugh, I immediately head for the library to see if I've missed anything else by the author. And, sure enough, I'd missed Dinky Hocker Shoots Smack! I must admit the title of that one took me aback; I was convinced it was one I could never use in the classroom. But, alas, I was wrong. Dinky is a memorable character not unlike many of the students whom I taught. She is lonely, sensitive and vulnerable. Her mother, who is too busy with her own life as a social worker to really notice her daughter, thinks Dinky's major problem is "a typical, adolescent plump stage." But, Dinky is not a teenager, nor a character, to go unnoticed, and by the end of the book her mother begins to know Dinky and her readers will never forget her. I read that book aloud to my students. And, it made them laugh and cry.

Now, if a book makes my students laugh and cry, I keep my eye open for more by the same author. Over the last decade I have come to know many of M. E. Kerr's characters: Adam, the son of someone famous who, with his friend Brenda Belle, invents "nothing power",

CS209585

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Buddy Boyle, the handsome teenager whose summer romance with Skye Pennington leads to a discovery that changes his life forever; Little Little LaBelle, a diminuative 18-year-old with a bigger than life personality; Alan Bennett who believes he is handsome, cool and dynamite, but learns through love and rejection that he is far more; and, most recently, three generations of Cone/Haigney's who span the years from WWII to 1980. All of these people have become a part of me and of my students. If you do not know them, I encourage you to make their acquaintance. And, once you've come to know them, I hope you will introduce them to your students. For, in these characters you will meet yourself and your friends. The mythical, but very real town, of Cayuta, New York, on one of the Finger Lakes, provides the background for the lives of many of these characters. And, because the town is small, M. E. Kerr is able to give us a glimpse of the world. We meet people who are so wrapped up in their own financial wealth that they are unable to see the human worth others. We meet middle aged parents who are afraid to laugh, teenagers who hide behind Hairgo, pounds or enchanting looks. M. E. Kerr introduces us to academically "gifted" people who are so consumed by their own knowledge that they minimize the intelligence of their family and friends. But, all of these characters change before our eyes on the pages of her books. They are not single dimensional people; they are multi-faceted.

I have often marveled at the ability of some writers to create real people; people who live with me beyond my reading of the book. How do they do it? How can I learn to do this in my own

writing? How can I teach my students? In 1983 M. E. Kerr wrote a a non-fiction book, not a novel, that gives me part of the answer. The book is entitled Me, Me, Me, Me, Me. This book is a writing teacher's dream. In the book M.E. not only talks about vignettes from her own life, but she explains how the people who were part of her life became the characters in her books. When I first read Me, Me, Me (and so on), I found myself surprised at her willingness to admit that the "real me", Marijane Meaker, is a part of each of her characters, that her parents with their strengths and flaws appear in many of the books, that her teenage classmates in up-state New York have been transformed into present day adolescents, that her neighbors populate Cayuta, and that her classmates and teachers at Stuart Hall still live in a private boarding school in Virginia. I've known for a long time that the stuff of fiction is the stuff of real life, afterall I live in Asheville, North Carolina where many of the local folks still harbor a grudge against Thomas Wolfe who never could come home again. I wonder if Marijane Meaker can ever go home again?

What the writer M. E. Kerr has given teachers in her one non-fiction book is one of the best works on teaching fiction writing to students. Many of us are convinced that our best writing, whether fiction or non-fiction, comes from our experiences. And, yet, this is rarely translated into our composition classes. Today, I teach writing to university students, many of whom are graduate students. And, what I find is an indictment on my own teaching sins. My students are masters at the five paragraph theme. When I ask them to analyze and

synthesize an article or a novel, they can do it in a flash. We have taught them to be wonderful academic writers. And, for that I am thankful. However, when I ask them to write something "creative", most of them freeze. I spend much of the semester attempting to defrost their writing hands. M. E. Kerr has helped. I recommend to the most frozen students that they buy a copy of Me, Me, Me. . . and begin by writing about their own lives, about the towns in which they grew up, about the student with the zits who sat next to them in English class. Often reading about Hyman "Hopeless" Ginzberg in Me, Me, Me. . . will encourage them to pick up If I Love You, Am I Trapped Forever? and read about Duncan "Doomed" Stein, Hy's fictional counterpart. Reading M. E. Kerr's memoir about her own high school friend Hy and his beloved Ella Gwen and later reading her fictional dipiction of these two characters, helps young writers understand how the people in one's life become the characters in one's books. I attempt to get my students to write fiction by beginning with personal memories, writing about real people and real places and than going beyond these personal narratives by asking questions such as "what if?"

For example, here is a very brief section of a much longer piece which is illustrative of what can happen when a self-proclaimed non-writer (one of my students) begins a piece of fiction with a personal experience, in this case a teacher's memory of two students in her class. The writer is Theresa Peek; the title of her story is "An Autumn Story".

If I were teaching high school today. I would begin a fiction writing unit by having my students read all or part of Me, Me, Me, . . . I'd have small groups read one or two vignettes each. After the group had read and discussed the vignette, they would read at least one book mentioned at the end note of the vignette. For example, if one group read the chapter entitled There's Not a Man in the Damn Nunnery! about Marijane Meaker's experience at Stuart Hall, they would then read Is That You, Miss Blue?, which is based on that experience. The group would compare and contrast the characters, the plot and the setting. After this they would discuss what M. E. Kerr, the author, did to turn this real-life situation into a novel with characters, plot, setting, point-of-view and theme. Each groups' work would be presented to the class.

Now, its the students' turn to write a memoir. Once the piece is written and discussed with peer writers, we'd examine as a class how to turn these non-fiction personal memories into pieces of fiction. The culmination of this unit, of course, is to turn the memory into a fictional work by expanding on the personalities - allowing them to grow and change, introducing new characters to act as foils, telling the story from the personal point of view of one or more characters (preferably, not themselves), developing the plot by asking "what if?" and creating a "two dog and one bone" conflict, and establishing the setting by making it an important element of the story. Once the writing is in first draft form, the students will have the opportunity to share it with their writing peers, to discuss changes needed to make it a

good piece of fiction and, finally, to publish it in a class publication.

My goal for this unit is to show students that characters do not develop in isolation from the real world; that fiction may be truer to life than personal memories. In addition, the students will be learning about the elements of fiction. They will be learning about these from their own experience as readers and writers. They will not only be able to identify plot structure in a work of someone else, but they will be able to develop plot in their own work. They will recognize characters who are rounded from their own experience developing multi-dementional personalities. They will understand that setting is more than a place in which a story takes place. They will know how an author establishes and changes point-of-view from their own experiences of doing so in their own writing. They will see that from strong characters and good plot line, theme develops. Because they will publish their work, they will be conscious of form and correctness. They will work on spelling, grammar, paragraph structure; but none of these will be done in isolation of their own writing, of their own lives. If believing in what one is doing is the root of motivation, these students will be highly motivated. For, afterall, motivation comes from within, not from a gimmick created by the teacher. And, if I am right, many of these students will keep writing. And, when they arrive in my university class, they will be able to write fiction as well as they write the five paragraph theme.

Thank you M. E. Kerr for writing your fiction and thank you Marijane Meaker for sharing your life with us, so that we can better learn to share our lives with others through our own writing.